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## THE ATTITUDE OF THE ROMANS TOWARD LITERARY PURSUITS

*In Two Parts—Part II*

To these various classes of critics Cicero makes answer in the following sections. To those who would have him use his pen for subjects other than those of philosophy he replies in § 11; he bids them note that the themes of philosophy are second to none in interest and importance; what can be better worth while, he asks, than to set forth the *finēs bonorum et malorum*? Qua de re cum sit inter doctissimos summa dissensio, quis alienum putet eius esse dignitatis quam mihi quisque tribuat quid in omni munere vitae optimum et verissimum sit exquirere?

Many more passages might be cited, but for the present our citations are ample. It is clear that to the Roman of parts, ambitious for a career, literature could be but a *parergon*, an avocation, not an *ergon*, a vocation, the serious business of his life. It is worth while to remember that, down to the Augustan Age, Roman writers were in the main also doers, players of important roles in Roman public affairs. In the *De Officiis* i §§ 150 151 Cicero discusses the occupations proper to a gentleman. Trading on a small scale is condemned out of hand; even transmarine commerce comes in for but scant endorsement. If, says Cicero, such commerce is conducted on a large scale, so that it makes accessible to Romans things to which they would otherwise be strangers, then it is not so bad; but if the *mercator*, content with his gains, retires wholly from business, then he is wholly commendable. Agriculture, of course, is unqualifiedly praised. Of the things of the spirit, literature and the higher arts, not one word is said.

What then was a provincial like Cicero, a *novus homo*, to do? Could he hope for a career if he devoted his splendid talents to literature alone? The citations given above make full answer to this question. No, Cicero's one chance of winning recognition of the fine powers of which he must early have been conscious lay in following the beaten paths. Beside agriculture, public life, with all that it then implied—oratory, knowledge of the law and skill in its practice, soldiering, statecraft—was a wholly irreproachable occupation. To this, then, Cicero applied himself with all his powers. In such a life as this he was, in a sense, out of his element; we need not wonder, therefore, that he was not always a distin-

guished success therein. Yet his career will bear comparison with that of other scholars in politics.

I said above that the consideration of our subject would throw light not only on Cicero's life, but also on the course of Roman literature as a whole. It goes without saying that among a people whose attitude toward intellectual and imaginative pursuits was such as I have sought to describe above literature would be a thing of slow growth. More than five centuries of life had been granted to the Roman state before that state possessed aught that could by any stretch be denominated literature. It is a commonplace that the beginnings of that literature were due to contact with Greek culture and in particular to the transplanting of that culture to Rome itself by a Greek, Livius Andronicus. The history of Latin literature has been finely summed up recently by Professor Leo as marked on the one hand by an ever increasing subjection of Roman life and Roman thought to Greek influences, on the other, strangely enough, by an ever increasing emancipation of literature from such influences. At its birth and for some time afterward Latin literature was wholly or in great part a translation literature: in time it ceased to be merely a translation literature and became in Catullus, in Lucretius, in Vergil, and others, far more independent than scholars and critics have in general, at least of late years, been willing to admit. I am not now concerned, however, in proving the originality of Latin literature; it is more to my present purposes to emphasize the Greek influence of the early times on that literature. The Romans, as said above, were slow to yield to any cultural influence; even in Cicero's time many were yet unprepared and unwilling to admit the value of philosophic thought. How much more pronounced must have been the resistance to such cultural influence at an early time, say in the age of Cato Censor! Echoes of that resistance are not hard to find. Cato Censor bade his son illorum (=Graecorum) litteras inspicere, non perdiscere; he declared, further, that quandoque ista gens suas litteras (nobis Romanis) dabit, omnia corrumpet. (See Pliny, H N xxix 14). Cicero's own grandfather was wont to say nostros homines similes esse Syrorum venalium: ut quisque optime Graece sciret ita esse nequissimum. (*Cicero De Or II* 26c.) In Sallust (*Bell Jug* 85) Marius, friend of the people, is made to say: Neque litteras Graecas didici, quippe quae ad virtutem doctoribus nihil profuerunt.

In 91 B C the censors, L Licinius Crassus and Cn Domitius Ahenobarbus sought to prevent the establishment in Rome of schools intended to supply rhetorical training in Latin after Greek models. Gellius (xv 11 2) gives their edict: *Renuntiatum est nobis esse homines qui novum genus disciplinae instituerunt, ad quos iuventus in ludum conveniat; eos sibi nomen imposuisse Latinos rhetoras; ibi homines adulescentulos dies totos desiderare. Maiores nostri quae liberos suos discere et quos in ludos itare vellent instituerunt. Haec nova, quae praeter consuetudinem ac morem maiorum fiunt, neque placent neque recta videntur. Quapropter et his qui eos ludos habent et his qui eo venire consuerunt visum est faciendum ut ostenderemus nostram sententiam, nobis non placere.*

Such, then, down through the Ciceronian Age was the attitude of the great mass of the Romans toward literary pursuits. With the Augustan Age a marked change is noticeable. The orthodox attitude toward trade and similar occupations remained what it had been, though that attitude was more and more honored in the breach rather than in the observance. Agriculture, too, held its place of honor; did not Augustus and Maecenas encourage Vergil to write the *Georgics*? Did not Horace, *Carm* ii 15, write in similar vein? For statesmanship, however, there was no place under the new regime, except as that statesmanship was put unreservedly at the emperor's service by some one who was willing, as Maecenas was, to efface himself. For oratory of the highest type of freedom of speech is indispensable; with the establishment of the empire freedom of speech was at an end. This meant much for prose writing in general. The Romans had used prose chiefly in connection with oratory and the writing of history. The writing of history did not, under the empire, offer a safe and attractive field; cf what Horace says in *C* ii 1-8 of Pollio's labors as a historian, and the words of Tacitus in the first three chapters of the *Agricola*. During the whole reign of Augustus but one prose writer, Livy, gained any great degree of fame. To poetry, however, conditions under the empire were distinctly favorable. The poet appeals primarily to the imagination; hence he could be made most useful in furthering the great object of Augustus, namely, to impress the imaginations of his subjects with the superiority of the new order of things to the conditions which had prevailed under the republic. It was to this end that Augustus sought to beautify the city, to revive national feeling and to quicken the conscience of the people. The poetry of Vergil and of Horace were among the instrumentalities employed by Augustus to achieve these purposes. Hence, though prose writing languished, poetry, thanks to the encouragement given

by Augustus and Maecenas, flourished, and gave to the Augustan Age its brightest distinction.

Two factors, then—the closing of the old avenues of distinction and the fact that literature might be made of service to the new order of things—combined in the Augustan Age to make it possible for men of parts to win distinction by pursuing literature as an end in itself.

It may be worth while to close this paper by remarking that in England itself, to the very beginning of the nineteenth century, the attitude of many toward literary pursuits, toward painting and sculpture, was virtually identical with that which has been ascribed above to the Romans. A very few citations must suffice. In his lecture on George the Third, Thackeray says: "A few years since the profession of arms was the only one which our nobles could follow. The Church, the Bar, medicine, literature, the arts, commerce were below them". Again, in *The Newcomes*, chapter xxvii, he says: "Newcome did not seem seriously to believe that his son would live by painting pictures, but considered Clive as a young prince who chose to amuse himself with painting. The Muse of Painting is a lady whose social station is not altogether recognized with us as yet. The polite world permits a gentleman to amuse himself with her, but to take her for better or for worse! forsake all other chances and cleave unto her! Many a respectable person would be as much shocked at the notion as if his son had married an opera-dancer". In *Pendennis*, chapter xxxvi, Major Pendennis says: "My object, Arthur, is to make a man of you—to see you well placed in the world, as becomes one of your name and my own, sir. You have got yourself a little reputation by your literary talents, which I am very far from undervaluing, though in my time, begad, poetry and genius and that sort of thing were devilish disreputable. There was poor Byron, for instance, who ruined himself, and contracted the worst habits by living with poets and newspaper writers, and people of that kind. But the times are changed now—there's a run upon literature—clever fellows get into the best houses, begad."

CHARLES KNAPP

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